156.

A SHORT ADDRESS

TO THE

PROTESTANT CLERGY

OF EVERY DENOMINATION,

ON THE

FUNDAMENTAL CORRUPTION

OF

CHRISTIANITY.

There is much to be done, much, I fear, to be ſuffered, by all the States of Chriſtendom, before the Goſpel of Chriſt can be ſaid to be eſtabliſhed amongſt them as a rule of life influencing their conduct.

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[PRICE ONE SHILLING.]

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

SHORT ADDRESS, &c.

GENTLEMEN,

AT a time when mankind are beginning to ſcan the inſtitutions of their anceſtors with a very ſerious view, permit me to call your attention to One in which you are all very particularly intereſted, and which I have long been led to conſider as a fundamental corruption of Chriſtianity—I mean, Gentlemen, the exiſtence of a diſtinct order of men entirely and excluſively devoted to the intereſts of religion.

If this ſeparation of Chriſtians into a clergy and a laity be, as I really conceive it to be, both unſcriptural and inexpedient, it is high time it were accurately looked to. It has ſubſiſted from a very early age, it is pertinaciouſly maintained by every ſect but one, and exceeds

in miſchief the common order of corruptions, as it has been the fruitful parent of all. At any rate, an enquiry into this ſubject, conducted (as on my ſide I intend it ſhall be) with candour, cannot poſſibly be productive of any ſerious harm. If I am right, you muſt confeſs that the ſooner the evil is aboliſhed, the better: and if I am wrong, it is fit at leaſt that Chriſtendom ſhould know the grounds on which it ſupports an immenſe and expenſive inſtitution.

Is a clergy of divine appointment? If it is not of divine appointment, can it be expedient? And, though it might be expedient, notwithſtanding this defect of ſanction, is it ſo in fact? Theſe three queſtions ſeem to include whatever can be urged upon the ſubject, either by way of objection or reply, and I ſhall purſue their diſcuſſion in the order in which they are propoſed.

If a clergy be of divine appointment, where does the record of that appointment appear? We ſhould naturally be led to ſearch for it among the firſt and moſt expreſs injunctions of Chriſt; becauſe we ſhould immediately

conclude, that an inſtitution profeſſing ſuch an important object as the ſupport and propagation of Chriſtianity, muſt have been regarded by the founder of our faith as a circumſtance of the firſt and deepeſt moment. We know, however, that no ſuch injunction exiſts.—If we failed of meeting with any direct injunction to this purpoſe, we ſhould at leaſt expect to find ourſelves invited to act by the energy of example: we ſhould look for ſomething inſtituted by Chriſt, in the nature of an eccleſiaſtical order; ſomething to imply the propriety of its exiſtence, and ſomething to ſuggeſt the means of its perpetuation. In this, however, we ſhould be equally diſappointed.

It may be denied, perhaps, that this fact is altogether ſo clear as the former; and the miſſion of the twelve, and afterwards of the ſeventy apoſtles, may be urged as affording ſome degree of analogical preſumption. It is a ſingular misfortune to thoſe who attack any old inſtitution, that they are frequently obliged to ſtate and to refute objections which muſt appear trifling and even ridiculous to perſons who view the ſubject with an unprejudiced

eye. Of this nature is that which I have propoſed.

What were the twelve Apoſtles? It appears by the united teſtimonies of all the Evangeliſts [a], that Chriſt, after having preached for a conſiderable time alone, ſelected Twelve of his diſciples, whom he inveſted with extraordinary powers, and entitled his apoſtles or meſſengers. They ſeem to have been diſpatched but once during his life, and then with a very limited commiſſion; but after his death and reſurrection, their intellectual eye was ſuddenly illumined, and they received a more general charge to ſpread the truths of the Goſpel to every nation under Heaven, beginning with Judæa [b]. Of thoſe who may be diſpoſed to draw a precedent from theſe apoſtles for an eccleſiaſtical order, I muſt beg leave to enquire, what reſemblance there can poſſibly be, between twelve perſons appointed with miraculous powers to go about and ſcatter the ſeeds of Chriſtianity amongſt all man-

[a] Matth. chap. x. ver. 1. Mark iii. 13—vi. 7. Luke vi. 13—ix. 1. John vi. 70—xv. 16—xvii. 18.

[b] Matth. chap. xxviii. 19. Mark xvi. 15. Luke xxiv. 45. John xx. 21.

kind, and a regular ſtanding ſtationary body, compoſed of at leaſt a million of individuals, poſſeſſed of no miraculous gifts whatever, and ſupported at an annual expence of fifty millions ſterling, whoſe functions are limited to ſeparate diſtricts where Chriſtianity is already profeſſed, and whoſe time (ſo far as it is employed in official concerns) is principally conſumed in reciting prayers, and catechizing, and marrying, and churching, and viſiting the ſick, and burying the dead, and adminiſtering the ſacrament, and performing a multiplicity of duties, neither whoſe names nor ideas occur in the whole compaſs of the ſcriptures? We might conclude, I think, with equal force, that becauſe one man was required to ſow a field of corn, it was requiſite to maintain eighty thouſand more to look on and ſee it grow. I even hope to convince you that this repreſentation is much more favourable than the fact will juſtify.

I merely mention the miſſion of the Seventy, becauſe it is the only remaining tranſaction which bears any relation whatever to the ſubject: it is however, if poſſible, ſtill more remote from any thing like a precedent for

an eccleſiaſtical order, ſince *they* muſt have acted rather as harbingers of the Meſſiah, than as preachers of the goſpel. Our account of their inſtitution, indeed, is extremely imperfect: Luke is the only evangeliſt who mentions the circumſtance at all[c]; and *he* has neglected to ſpecify the names of any one of the Seventy, or to make any ſubſequent alluſion whatever to their miſſion. We may collect, however, that with powers as ample, and regulations as rigid, as thoſe of the Twelve on their firſt excurſion, and ſuch as are abundantly ſufficient to diſtinguiſh a primitive apoſtle from a modern divine, the more limited nature of their deſtination muſt place an unſurmountable bar to any ſuch reſemblance. They were diſpatched by Chriſt, not to mankind at large, but to thoſe particular towns and diſtricts where he himſelf was afterwards to come: they were enjoined to publiſh, not all the doctrines of Chriſtianity, but merely the preparatory and prophetic admonition which John the Baptiſt had long before delivered---"The kingdom of heaven is at "hand."

[c] Luke, chap. x. ver. 1.

So much, Gentlemen, for the *evangelical* teſtimonies in your favour; which obviouſly amount to nothing. You will probably reſt your hopes on the conduct of the apoſtles in the eſtabliſhment of the firſt Chriſtian churches, and the choice will not be injudicious. It is, indeed, much to be regretted that we poſſeſs ſuch ſlight accounts of theſe important tranſactions. Upon the queſtion in debate, the Acts of the Apoſtles and the Epiſtles afford us no direct intelligence whatever; and their tranſient alluſions to it are of ſuch a queſtionable nature, as will furniſh ingenuity with every opportunity to eſcape, and ſophiſtry with every means to perplex. I ſtill think, however, it is poſſible for candour to collect, even from theſe ſcanty documents, ſome very clear and deciſive information.

With the mere Engliſh reader it may be difficult, if not impracticable, to ſubdue the prepoſſeſſions imbibed from a tranſlation moſt ſcandalouſly accommodated to the prejudices of the times [d]. The names of deacons, and

[d] There is one glaring and ridiculous inſtance which I cannot refrain from citing. In the application of a prophecy

elders, and biſhops, very frequently occur: the deacons he naturally conſiders as an order of imperfect prieſthood; and if he is puzzled at the elders, he immediately aſſociates with the biſhops, the mitre and the croſier, the temporal revenues and ſpiritual dominion of our dignified prelates. Even the ſcholar himſelf, who muſt have drawn the firſt rudiments of his faith from this polluted fountain, will not be entirely free, perhaps, from a ſecret and inſenſible bias; and the only hope of counteracting the effects of ſuch a groſs perverſion of names muſt reſult from the ſubſtitution of others.

The deacons, we are certain, were poſſeſſed of no ſpiritual functions, ſince they were appointed for the expreſs purpoſe of relieving the apoſtles from ſecular concerns. "And in thoſe days, when the number of the diſciples was multiplied, there aroſe a murmuring of the Grecians againſt the Hebrews,

from the Pſalms, our tranſlators (Acts of the Apoſtles, chap. i. ver. 20) render it—"Let his habitation be deſolate, and no man dwell therein; and his *biſhoprick* let another take." David's enemy a biſhop! Might we not as well talk of the quarter ſeſſions at Athens, and the board of ordnance at Rome?

becauſe their widows were neglected in the daily miniſtration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the diſciples unto them, and ſaid, It is not reaſon that we ſhould leave the word of God *and ſerve tables:* Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you ſeven men of honeſt report, full of the holy ghoſt and of wiſdom, whom we may appoint over *this buſineſs:* but *we* will give ourſelves continually to prayer and the miniſtry of the word[e]." If they preached the goſpel, as we know that Stephen and Philip did, with diſtinguiſhed zeal, they acted, not under any particular commiſſion as deacons, but from a general obligation as Chriſtians; and co-operated merely with thoſe who, when diſperſed by the perſecution in which Saul aſſiſted, and Stephen ſuffered[f], went about ſpreading the word and converting numbers, with the expreſs ſanction of God, and the full approbation of the apoſtles.

That the πρεσβυτεροι and the επισκοποι, the elders and the ſuperintendants were, in the

[e] Acts, chap. vi. ver. 1—4.

[f] Acts, chap. viii. ver. 4.—xi. 19, 21.

apoſtolic age, the ſame deſcription of men, is confeſſed by every writer whom you would wiſh to quote. There is a paſſage in the Acts of the Apoſtles which puts it out of queſtion. When Paul took his final leave of the church at Epheſus, he ſent for the πρεσβυτεροι, and (waving for the preſent all conſideration of what theſe elders were) charged them to be careful of the flock over which the holy ghoſt had appointed them επισκοποι [g]. The title of επισκοποι is here ſo expreſsly applied to the πρεσβυτεροι, and ſo inconteſtibly denotes the mere cenſorial character with which the latter were inveſted, that even our tranſlators have departed from their favourite expreſſion of "biſhops" and rendered it "overſeers [h]."

And who were theſe elders whom a corrupt verſion has transformed into biſhops? You know very well, Gentlemen, that the term πρεσβυτερος, which in itſelf implies only the diſtinction of age, expreſſed in a more appropriate ſenſe a particular order of men among the Jews, whoſe influence appears to have produced ſome ſubordination even during

[g] Acts, chap. xx. ver. 28.

[h] See too 1 Peter, chap. v. ver. 1, 2, in the *original*.

their Egyptian bondage, and whoſe authority as magiſtrates and judges, ſubſiſted to their final diſperſion by Veſpaſian. Now the firſt mention which occurs of any *Chriſtian* πρεσβυτεροι is in the church at Jeruſalem, which was founded by the apoſtles, who had themſelves been Jews, and ſtill preſerved a propenſity to the cuſtoms of their nation. This church ſerved as a model to all the reſt which were afterwards ſucceſſively planted; and the πρεσβυτεροι appointed in moſt of them, we may conclude to have been perſons ſelected for their gravity and experience to preſerve a general regulation in theſe little independent republics, who conſidered it as a matter of ſingular reproach to have any queſtion from their ſociety referred to a pagan tribunal. There is nothing in any of the texts where theſe elders are mentioned which at all oppoſes this very natural concluſion, and there is a paſſage in Paul's firſt Epiſtle to Timothy which ſufficiently confirms it. "Let the elders who rule well," ſays he, "be counted worthy of double honour, eſpecially thoſe who labour in the word and doctrine[i]." If

[i] 1 Tim. chap. v. ver. 17.

thoſe were to be diſtinguiſhed with *particular* approbation who laboured in the word and doctrine, this labour could not be the common practice of all, nor conſequently the official duty of any; and thus, Gentlemen, the laſt ſcriptural pillar of your hopes crumbles into duſt.

And yet, if ever there was a period when a ſtanding miniſtry might ſeem to be requiſite, it was at the time of the apoſtles. Chriſtianity was not then to be merely kept alive as a national religion, it was to be preſerved amongſt a few ſcattered aſſemblages of haſty converts againſt the relapſes of fear, caprice, and diſguſt; it was to be ſpread, in this ſtate of frail and obnoxious infancy, through all the obſtacles which pride and power, and ignorance and prejudice, would naturally oppoſe to its progreſs; there ſubſiſted at that time, too, no regular hiſtory of its inſtitution, and all the knowledge of its doctrines, and all the evidence of its truth, muſt have been derived entirely from the oral teſtimonies and inſtructions of its advocates. We have no reaſon, however, to regret that it was deſtitute of eccleſiaſtical aid. We ſee what it did

without it; we ſee what it does with it. We ſee that a religion which, under every poſſible diſcouragement, made a rapid and effective progreſs, now ſtagnates wherever it is received, and juſt retains importance enough to afford a nick-name to thoſe who are born into its faith.

Beſides, Gentlemen, and I propoſe it, I aſſure you, by no means as a captious, but as a ſolid and even deciſive objection, if a regular body of clergy were of divine appointment, the means by which ſuch a body ſhould be formed and perpetually renewed, muſt be of divine appointment alſo. Could it be a matter of indifference to Chriſt, or to the apoſtles, how many or how few ſhould be the champions of the faith? Could it be a matter of indifference, by what method they ſhould be ſelected and appointed? Could it be a matter of indifference, to what functions they ſhould conſecrate their talents and their time? An order of men without a principle of origination or the means of ſupport, and compoſed of perſons poſſeſſed of no determinate qualifications, and devoted to no ſpecific ends, may fall perhaps within the catalogue of ontologi-

cal abſtractions, but could never be the expreſs or the implied deſignation of thoſe who had to deal with men and things as they ſtand arrayed in all the rich attire of nature. You muſt not miſtake me, Gentlemen, I do not mean to aſſert or to inſinuate that all or that any part of you have miſconceived the particular nature of your vocation, or that you have uſurped thoſe privileges which more properly belong to others: but, that an office to which none can make an excluſive title, can be the excluſive right of none; and that duties which are not defined, cannot have been preſcribed.

It would be a matter of curious ſpeculation to trace the progreſs by which the lay heads of the primitive Chriſtian congregations gradually crept into eccleſiaſtical authority, marſhalled themſelves by imperceptible degrees into a regular and well organized corps, and at length received from the gracious patronage of Conſtantine, a legal and corporate exiſtence under the excluſive denomination of "the Church." Such an enquiry, however, would lead me far beyond my preſent deſign; it might probably, too, at this time, exhauſt

your patience or your moderation; and though it is too inviting to abandon altogether, I will at leaſt reſerve it for ſome future treſpaſs on your attention.

It is amuſing enough to obſerve, how fairly and how forcibly the weapons of contending theologians might frequently be turned by a common adverſary againſt themſelves. The clergyman of the eſtabliſhment, in expoſing the ſuperſtitious obſervances of the papiſt, boldly appeals to ſcripture, and pronounces their condemnation, upon the principle, that whatever is not contained in that ſacred code muſt neceſſarily be of human addition, and that every human addition is a diſgrace and an injury to our moſt holy religion. The diſſenting divine employs the ſame formidable argument againſt the member of the eſtabliſhment, with the ſame unſuſpecting confidence and ſecret triumph: and yet I queſtion whether either party will be diſpoſed to allow the natural application of this dangerous teſt to themſelves, and to admit, that if their order is not of divine appointment it cannot be expedient. I will not waſte your time, Gentlemen, with enter-

ing upon an obſolete and muſty controverſy, when I can expeditiouſly and fairly encloſe my adverſaries in the horns of a dilemma. With other opponents I might deſpiſe or I might fear ſuch a ſummary deciſion, but I will not diſdain it with thoſe who raſhly contend that the plans of the Almighty may be improved by the ſuggeſtions of an inſect. Either then an unſcriptural addition to Chriſtianity may be expedient, or it cannot: if it cannot, my poſition is granted; but if it may, then papal dominion, and the authority of councils, and monaſtic inſtitutions, *may be* expedient, and I will leave my proteſtant opponents to ſtruggle as they can with their catholic antagoniſts.

In the mean time, Gentlemen, permit me to draw your attention to the laſt queſtion which I have propoſed to conſider---I mean the propriety of ſuch an order as the clergy, taking it upon the broad and general ground of expediency. By this I foreſee that the point in debate will be finally decided; for, after all, mankind will be governed, and upon the whole perhaps juſtly enough, much

more by thoſe arguments which turn on what is practically fitting than by thoſe which regard merely what is ſpeculatively true.

Is not then, it will be urged, is not a regular inſtitution as neceſſary for the ſupport as it was for the firſt propagation of Chriſtianity? Without a particular order of men ſet apart to enforce the truths of the Goſpel, can we expect that ſuch truths, between thoſe who are unwilling and thoſe who are unable to ſearch them out, will be attended to at all? And will not the conſequences of this univerſal neglect, be a total diſregard of religion and a frightful depravity of morals? Such topics may be adorned with more eloquence than I can poſſibly anticipate; but their refutation, I think, is eaſy and obvious. I might boldly aſk whether Chriſtianity *can* be in a worſe ſtate than it is at preſent, under the full protection and ſuccour of its profeſſional champions; whether it could poſſibly operate leſs forcibly on the judgment and manners of mankind; or whether in any ſhape it could be expoſed in ſo defenceleſs a condition to the open and concealed attacks of ſpreading infidelity? Without relying,

however, on this invidious defence, I will ſtate with confidence, for I may ſtate with truth, that every argument for the expediency of a clergy, on the ground of the neceſſity of oral inſtructors in religion, is eſſentially fallacious, ſince it aſſumes for granted, that without a prieſthood no teachers of Chriſtianity will exiſt.

Does it follow, that becauſe no particular order of men is excluſively devoted to the preaching of the Goſpel, that the Goſpel will not be preached, or even ably preached? To what do we truſt for the due execution of every uſeful employment in ſociety, but to caſual and ſpontaneous exertion?---We do not *appoint* our ſhoemakers, our architects, or our lecturers in philoſophy: we leave human nature to operate by itſelf; we ſuffer mankind to follow and to relinquiſh whatever purſuits they think proper, and we employ and pay them as we want and approve them. We are guided in this by the ſoundeſt aud moſt experienced policy. We know that whatever ſociety wants, it will be the intereſt of ſome part of it to provide; and we are ſatisfied that the more free and unlimited the competition, the

cheaper and the better will the commodity, whatever it is, be procured. The farce of guilds, and companies and corporations, has long ſince been exploded. We ſee that the objects of theſe inſtitutions flouriſh better without them: we ſee that to *force* any employment, is to ſacrifice the good of the whole to that of a part, and ultimately to weaken the intereſts of that very part whoſe cauſe we ſo fooliſhly eſpouſe and ſuffocate with our prepoſterous kindneſs. Whatever is uſeful has a neceſſary tendency to eſtabliſh itſelf: and it *will* eſtabliſh itſelf, unleſs obſtructed by poſitive hindrance, or the no leſs efficacious hindrance of unſeaſonable aid. So far as the preaching of Chriſtianity is expedient, Chriſtianity will be preached. It will be preached as every other uſeful truth in philoſophy or morals is taught and propagated in ſociety, by thoſe who derive an immediate reward for their labours, or by thoſe who gratuitouſly ſupport it from a conviction of its value and importance; and, in either caſe, with an induſtry and zeal which muſt beggar the languid operation of profeſſional aſſiſtance.

To deal no longer in general theory, Gentlemen, let us ſuppoſe that in a diſtrict of the

ſize (for example) of a moderate pariſh, a perſon of ſome ſenſe and information gave at a ſtated time, every Sunday we will ſay, a lecture of about an hour long on Chriſtianity, explaining in a clear and eaſy way, its nature, its deſign, and its obligations; and that this lecturer were a country gentleman, a merchant, or intelligent farmer. Do you not really think, Gentlemen, that Chriſtianity would be as effectually preached, I aſk no more, but *as* effectually, as it is by yourſelves? Do you not really imagine (theological erudition apart) that if fathers baptized their children, if families buried their dead, if civil magiſtrates united couples, and ſerious perſons met over a frugal repaſt for religious converſation, that the children would be as good Chriſtians, that the dead would ſleep as ſoundly, that the marriage bed would be as undefiled, and the life and death of Chriſt as faithfully commemorated, as if the whole were performed under the direction of a maſter of the ceremonies in a black coat and cropped hair? Yes, yes, Gentlemen, Chriſtianity would be as largely and ſucceſsfully promoted, as if we could ſummon from their graves all the divines, regular and ſecular,

conforming and diſſenting, that ever darkened Chriſtendom with their ſwarms.

Excite but the neceſſity, or even the occaſion, for any exertion, and the talents and ſpirit equal to that exertion will ſoon appear: they will ſpring up in a ſoil, frequently, where we ſhould leaſt expect them. Let men but feel that the buſineſs of religion is in *their* hands, and that it is to expect no ſupport whatever from any peculiar order, and every man will begin to think about it himſelf: a ſpirit to give and a ſpirit to receive inſtruction will be formed, and Chriſtianity will prevail over its deadlieſt enemy---indifference. The effects of a contrary ſyſtem will of courſe be oppoſite. By placing the care of religion in any particular order, we lead the bulk of mankind to neglect it entirely, and its ſuppoſititious guardians ſoon yield to the general languor of the times. We then hear of men's groſs inattention to the ſalvation of their ſouls, and of the neceſſity of maintaining a clergy to preſerve ſome ſenſe of religion among them: we forget that the remedy we apply, is the very cauſe of the diſorder; we forget, what the experience of all ages and nations

atteſts, that man is naturally a religious animal, and that nothing but a moſt perverted ſyſtem could deſtroy a propenſity which in its genuine vigour it would be more requiſite, perhaps, to allay than inflame.

It is not however, Gentlemen, from its being unſcriptural and inexpedient alone, that I am induced to make this remonſtrance on your order. Without doubt to every Chriſtian mind this muſt appear the moſt ſerious and important objection; but another exiſts which, though ſubordinate, will not be entirely neglected by any whoſe zeal has not ſwallowed up their reaſon. Hume has ſomewhere finely obſerved, that the clergy are in poſſeſſion of the fulcrum, of the δος που στω, which Archimedes vainly required to move the world. The idea is as correctly juſt, as it is beautifully and forcibly ſuggeſted. All civil government is founded, it ſubſiſts, on temporal conſiderations: we look for temporal rewards, we are deterred by temporal puniſhments, and the fabric of ſociety is upheld: but a prieſthood operates on different hopes and fears; it ſways a ſceptre, it holds a juriſdiction independent of the ſtate; and its

ſpiritual dominion may perpetually be employed to diſturb the temporal tranquility of mankind. This power is not a phantom of the brain; every page of hiſtory atteſts not merely its exerciſe but its abuſe. A gentle and affectionate religion has been converted into a ſcatterer of diſcord, and Chriſtians have worried each other like dogs. The ſeeds of theſe abuſes, I grant you, muſt previouſly have exiſted in the human mind; but is it right or prudent to maintain an order of men perpetually prepared to expand theſe embrio miſchiefs into giant evils; to inflame a cool averſion into ſavage perſecution; and to pervert thoſe religious paſſions and affections, which in their natural ſtate would probably be harmleſs and perhaps beneficial, into engines of ſuch terrible and deſtructive energy as common feeling ſhudders at? Without a prieſthood, men might differ and diſpute about religion, as they have differed and diſputed about the cauſe of winds and earthquakes; but they would not burn each other's dwellings, or cut each other's throats, and anticipate thoſe torments which they cannot inflict. I do not ſay, Gentlemen, I do not think, that you have deſigned and planned all the miſchiefs you have

occaſioned. In many, doubtleſs, you have been the innocent, and in many the involuntary cauſe; but you have been no leſs the cauſe, and the cauſe no leſs requires removal. As knowledge is encreaſed and diffuſed, the danger of theſe evils, I admit too, is proportionably diminiſhed [k]: but we are not yet, I apprehend, entirely purged from ignorance and intolerance; and a late abominable tranſaction may teach us, that more precaution is requiſite than our vanity will always allow us to ſuſpect.

It is not improbable, Gentlemen, but you may inſiſt upon my raſhneſs as an obvious and plauſible topic of defence. If we retrench from Chriſtianity, you may ſay, all that I tacitly avow, and all that I expreſsly maintain, to what ſhall we reduce it? If we ſtrip it of a prieſthood, and with a prieſthood, of all thoſe forms of faith and ceremonial obſervances which have ſprung from this radical inſtitution, what will there remain of it? I will anſwer, without heſitation or reſerve, that there will remain the hiſtory of a reve-

[k] The furious bigotry of ſuch a writer as Mr. Whitaker (for example) might, in an age of groſs ignorance, have been really formidable.

lation from God, to announce to us and to all mankind, the certainty of a future and eternal exiſtence, and to point out the effects of our conduct here upon our ſtate hereafter. This, Gentlemen, is what I conceive will remain, after every propoſed reduction has been made, and every obnoxious ordinance aboliſhed. We ſhall perhaps ceaſe, indeed, to conſecrate the ſeventh part of our time to ſhameful idleneſs or unprofitable exertion; we ſhall probably ceaſe to encloſe ourſelves in churches and meeting-houſes, to make an oſtentatious diſplay of periodical devotion; and we ſhall certainly ceaſe to practiſe or to witneſs a variety of ſenſeleſs mummeries which your predeceſſors very ingeniouſly invented as a colourable pretence for their exiſtence: but in what remains, I apprehend we ſhall find abundant exerciſe for the moſt ardent and indefatigable zeal. We ſhall be led, I mean, Gentlemen, as Chriſtians we ſhall be led, to offer up our prayers to the Author of our being and our hopes, not amidſt the pageantry of public devotion, but in the ſecret and ſilent retirement of the cloſet. As Chriſtians we ſhall be led to exerciſe our obedience to his will, not in feaſtings and faſtings, and

genuflexions, and all the trumpery of human embelliſhment, but in deeds of active benevolence, in promoting the good of mankind and of all animated nature, in deterring from vice, in exhorting to virtue, in forgiving of injuries, in feeding the hungry, in cloathing the naked, in performing (in a word) all thoſe innumerable charities which you yourſelves conſider as compoſing the true moral character of a Chriſtian.

——But do we not enforce theſe doctrines ourſelves? Doubtleſs you do, Gentlemen, and frequently with a diligence which is truly laudable; but then you counteract the good you would otherwiſe produce, by the evil which you connect and propagate with it. We cannot but obſerve in all mankind a ſtrong propenſity to reſt their moral excellence on the ſtrict obſervance of the poſitive injunctions, rather than of the moral precepts of their religion. They are led to this, I conceive, by no means, as is commonly ſuppoſed, from perceiving that the former are of much eaſier obſervance than the latter: in many inſtances I doubt the fact of this ſuperior eaſe; and in all I queſtion the poſſibility

of men's ſo groſsly impoſing upon themſelves, or imagining that they can ſo groſsly impoſe on the Searcher of all hearts. They are actuated, I believe, by a much more excuſeable motive. The doctrines of morality are ſo eſſential to the due preſervation of all ſocial intercourſe, that they will naturally be enforced more or leſs in every ſyſtem of religion, and will be in ſome meaſure regarded even by thoſe who diſclaim all religious belief whatever. In the performance of theſe, therefore, the religioniſt feels that he does nothing more than what is conſidered as the common duty of all, and inſtinctively attaches himſelf to thoſe peculiar rites and ceremonies which diſtinguiſh *his* faith from every other, and form (as he conceives) a more appropriate and grateful offering to the Deity he ſerves. The conſequence is obvious and inevitable. Thoſe poſitive inſtitutions, which at firſt view appeared harmleſs, and in ſome reſpects edifying, gain every moment a freſh acceſſion of importance and reſpect: their approaches are gradual and ſilent, but deciſive: they creep into eſteem, they encroach upon affection, and unleſs repelled by the moſt vigilant and obſtinate precaution, abſorb the

whole of that religious zeal which, if properly directed, might regenerate the world. Now of all poſitive inſtitutions, a prieſthood ſeems beyond compariſon the worſt, ſince it is not only in itſelf pernicious,---by taking the buſineſs of religion out of the hands of thoſe whom it moſt intimately concerns, and leading them to place their merits in the hearing, rather than in the inveſtigation and practice of the word,---but ſubſiſts and thrives by the propagation of every other corruption.

I ſhall detain your attention, Gentlemen, no longer. I make no apology for the brevity with which I have treated the ſubject, becauſe it really appears to me one of thoſe where little can be ſaid till there is ſomething to anſwer; but I truſt, that neither in the matter nor the manner of what I *have* ſtated, is there any thing which can juſtly offend one honeſt man among you. I am ſure it would give me very ſerious uneaſineſs, if I thought it were poſſible. To ſuch of your order who conſider their evangelical office in the light merely of a lucrative profeſſion, I ſhall undoubtedly appear under the obnoxious ſhape of a deſperate and audacious foe. Like Paul

at Epheſus, I ſhall raiſe a hubbub amongſt thoſe whoſe craft I endanger; and I may expect that the outcry will be the more obſtreperous, as the profits I attack are probably far more precious than thoſe of the ſhrine-makers to the great goddeſs Diana. But from ſuch among you who have truly the intereſts of religion and of human nature at heart, I ſhall look for candour at leaſt, if not for conviction. Animated by the ſame proſpects, and pointing to the ſame goal, pilgrims on the ſame journey, which we muſt both ſo ſhortly cloſe, and where the fellowſhip of all worthy men is the beſt balm to the doubts, the cares, the perplexities, and untoward ills which aſſail us, we may ſurely jog quietly on together, and while we agree in the unity of our object, diſcuſs the different means by which we propoſe to attain it, with temper and moderation.

I remain, Gentlemen, and believe me not the leſs faithfully for this Addreſs,

Your ſincere well-wiſher.

April 2, 1792.

I have cautiouſly abſtained from adducing the Quakers as a living inſtance of the inutility of a prieſthood, becauſe I know that *that* inoffenſive and exemplary body is ſuppoſed to derive ſome involuntary benefit from the clergy of other ſects. This convenient opinion, which has been very induſtriouſly circulated, deſerves to be expoſed. If any ſociety ſhould ſcrupulouſly reject all medical aſſiſtance, we ſhould conſider it as extremely abſurd to attribute the good health of its members to ſome latent benefit from our ſurgeons and phyſicians. What advantage can the Quakers poſſibly derive from an eccleſiaſtical order,—with regard to piety and morals, in which they muſt put the paſtor and his flock to the bluſh, —or in reſpect to a theological erudition, which it is well known they uniformly deſpiſe. I cannot be ſuppoſed to favour the ſpirit of fanaticiſm from which this ſingular ſect originally ſprung; but I do think that it exhibits a ſubject for much curious and uſeful ſpeculation. A numerous body, religious without a prieſthood, a creed, or a ceremonial obſervance, and orderly without the aid of government, and almoſt without the benefit of laws, points out a perfectibility in man which merits a more philoſophical examination than it has yet received.

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April 14, 1792.